**Context-monitoring for adaptive management**

**Purpose:** This guidance note on context-monitoring is written for a wide audience and in particular for those involved with the design of the Fragile Context Programme Approach (FCPA).

The guidance explains what context-monitoring is and how concepts such as indicators and signals can help operations be agile and flexible to understand the present as well as to anticipate the future. It aims to simplify the organisations understanding of context and its ability to act when confronted with change. It is a collaborative process and should involve multiple teams including Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL), operations and security to ensure acceptance of findings and a holistic approach from analysis to action.

The scope, purpose and benefits of the exercise should be agreed with leadership and relevant teams before beginning. To ensure agility each aspect of it should be as simple as practical.

The guidance note includes both practical tips and general principles for setting up and conducting context-monitoring. Therefore, the reader may find some sections more relevant than others for their particular purpose depending on their role and interest, which can range from senior leader to project staff member.

**What is context-monitoring?** At its core, context-monitoring is about understanding your surroundings well enough to be able to actively make good and timely decisions on how to act as a team This includes whether to adapt project or operations or not to ensure they remain relevant, conflict sensitive, effective and safe for staff implementing it in the new circumstances.

Strategic context-monitoring may often be similar to that which exists within the MEAL frameworks, but it is not the same thing. All types of monitoring systems whether simple or complex need to have a plan in place, including among other things well defined indicators/signals, who collects information, how, when, and from whom.

The main difference between a context monitoring system and a programme MEAL system is the type of information collected and its purpose. The focus of programme MEAL is on activities, inputs, outcomes of the programme and the focus of context monitoring is to track changes surroundings (ie election results, violence, rainfall, market prices, community acceptance).

When we monitor the context, a helpful distinction can be to think about it as (1) *indicators* of the past and present and (2) *signals* of the future.

Both can be pre-selected linked to particular scenarios but it is also good to allow scope for monitoring other things that may come up unexpectedly.

* *Indicators* ‘indicate’ something that is currently happening or has happened in the context, which may require a change in WV’s project. This can be something that happened right next to the project or something that happened in a different country.
* S*ignals* suggest that something is about to happen. They signal a future development, which may need to be prepared for. Similar to indicators, they can be geographically close or distant.

For example:

Your car speedometer may tell you that you are driving at 50km/h. That is an **indicator** of your *current* speed.

Next to your speedometer is a warning light telling you that you are almost out of fuel. That light **signals** that something is shortly about to happen in the *future*. It implies a potentially different outcome for your journey than you planned, as well as actions that need to be taken if you want to keep driving at 50km/h. It tells you what is about to happen, but it won’t necessarily tell you exactly when and is harder to point to precisely.

For World Vision's work this could look as follows:

* Number of demonstrations in the last week (indicator)
* Location of demonstrations taking place today (indicator)
* Number of protestors on the street today (indicator)
* Motive for demonstrations taking place today (indicator) and next week (signal)
* Likelihood of demonstrations occurring next week (signal)
* Nature of demonstrations today (indicator) and next week (signal). For example, they may have been unarmed and peaceful last week, but are likely to be armed violent next week, signalling increasing unrest

**Signals** and **indicators** may monitor the same issue but are distinct in their purpose and utility. Indicators can be easier to measure quantitatively but should never be limited just to this. They often they still require wider context and human analysis to explain and understand why they are occurring and what impact they may or may not have on current or future project activities or approaches. They can and should change as operations and contexts evolve, and should often include items that are not necessarily directly related to an operational area.

Signals are more important for the future-orientation of a project and require skilled human decision-making, often by staff as well as the community, to be utilised well. They are often more likely to be qualitative because they can be less precise. Both indicators and signals may monitor rapid changes as well as ones that develop slowly.

Signals can for example relate to the attitude of key actors in a context, or more intangible observations such as the public mood that are challenging to pinpoint but critically important, especially during this time of pent-up frustration from the pandemic. They can be insights such as anticipation that an anticipated lack of savings in communities will lead to a food crisis within a few months if rains fail. Or that an anticipated growth in armed protests instead of unarmed ones will lead to a scenario of more forceful policing and violent clashes. This is a way signals can connect to scenarios.

Indicators and signals should both be identified with the intended audience of programme staff and decision-makers in mind. It recognises that their value is based on their utility to the individuals charged with making decisions for the operations in the area they cover.

So to use the car analogy again:

When your car speedometer **indicates** that you are currently driving at 50km/h, it is a good quantitative measure of your current speed. But to know if that is “good” or “bad” we have to put that indicator in context. So in order to make this further observation so that the **indicator** means something, it requires other context information to evaluate and arrive at a decision. In this analogy this could be the speed limit or the condition of the road. *In an operating context this could be the number of demonstrations in contrast to what is expected normally in that particular place at the time.*

When your car tells you that you are low on fuel, it is a **signal** of something to come, but has yet to impact you. How serious the signal is will depend on how far away the next gas station is and how much of a problem running out of fuel would be.

Running out of fuel in a safe town might just be embarrassing. But running out of a fuel on a dangerous road as it gets dark may be life-threatening. So while the fuel light will **signal** a potential issue to come, the determination or threshold of how bad and what actions are needed will be a human judgment made by the driver based on the particular circumstances at the time.

Both signals and indicators are essential to good context-monitoring. The key aspect is a process in which involves community input and combines with a culture of flexibility and real-time human analysis by front line decision makers, so that they are interpreted in the context of the organisation and the circumstances at the time, which may change rapidly.

**Principles for effective context monitoring**

**A culture of flexibility, and subsidiarity of decision-making**: Subsidiarity, or making decisions at the lowest practical and appropriate level is key to effectiveness. This is also why the individuals who make those decisions are the primary users of context-monitoring. Global and regional staff are often secondary users. As such, the design should be as simple and pragmatic as possible to minimise complexity, increase agility and save time and effort at the local level.

There is no one-size-fits-all template for context-monitoring, and how to do it may need to change rapidly. The focus is on having the right insights and data to decision-makers at the time when they need to make those active decisions on whether adaptations are necessary or not. This means the process needs to be flexible enough to adapt if the context changes. It needs to be designed in such a way that makes sense to the leaders who are in place and also tries to collect data consistently so that trends and changes can be assessed over time.

Good context-monitoring is therefore contingent upon a culture of good decision-making (which is outside the scope of this paper). It empowers the design and usage of context-monitoring insights and data in a range of decisions on whether adaptations are necessary or not, including project choices (sectors, locations and scale) and wider support services (e.g security, finance, logistics). This can be at organisational and individual levels and in different time frames ranging from day to day actions to longer term strategic choices. Any decisions on whether adaptations are necessary or not, informed by context-monitoring, whether big or small, are evidence of adaptive management.

Finally, this is a culture that requires and allows leadership and decision-makers to act on context-monitoring at senior as well as community levels. This provides for agility for the project to respond in real time.

**Demonstrable willingness to support change by leadership:** Context-monitoring works best where staff are convinced that leadership is willing to reassess the current approach if circumstances change or are likely to change and support it as required (such as being having flexible funding available to support as needed). Staff who believe that their managers will listen to them, the information they bring in and their thoughts and support the changes they make will be more likely to engage in creative context-monitoring. This is a key incentive to do context-monitoring well.

**Tolerance of ambiguity:** We monitor the context because we are not sure what may happen next. The future, as well as the present, is ambiguous and our monitoring should reflect that lack of certainty, and we should not overstate our confidence. When during monitoring we notice something important but unclear, we should note it as such and not try to make it clearer than it is nor ignore it for the benefit of something less important but clearer. Monitoring uncertainty, through looking at multiple sources and applying good judgement, is important.

**Value of human decision-making:** At the end of the day human beings make the decisions that matter, helped or hindered by systems and structures. It is therefore important that those people are provided with needed tools and freedom to make good decisions. While the humanitarian sector likes to talk about processes and evidence, it is essential that people remain at the centre of the decision-making, which by extension means that context-monitoring should be designed and performed with that in mind.

For example, context-monitoring may show that the context is changing in a particular operating area, but whether that actually means that operations should change or not is up to the decision-maker. The decision not to change operations is as important as the one to change it, and both decisions show a good utility of context-monitoring and decision-making. The key element is the *active use of information by decision-makers*, not necessarily the operational change.

This means information should be designed, collected and presented in such a way that it suits the end-user, which will primarily be the decision-maker, with statistical and data-base use as secondary usage. Often, qualitative analysis such as nuanced insights and their carefully considered implications from trusted local sources will be game-changers.

**Relationship-building and trust with communities and with donors**: Much of the important insights that will guide good context-monitoring will come from key individuals who are well connected and well-informed. It will be important to build and maintain those connections, and ensure that the insight from key people are given the weight they deserve in the monitoring. The relationship building will contribute to community acceptance which further helps other project operations and access.

**Listening to the voices of communities and staff:** Sometimes the best source of information will be seemingly unlikely individuals such as shop-owners or taxi drivers, or generally well-connected persons with the communities we are working with, including front line staff members. For example, drivers will often have a very good understanding of check-points, traffic patterns and road conditions. If asked, they can often add a lot of day-to-day insights. The local supermarket staff will know how their supply chains work, and can often quickly tell if the prices are going up in the area. Identifying people like this is essential to having good, local information that is available quickly.

**Operating with margins:** A key element to being open to and able to change is to have the space and resources to do so. A person or an organisation who consistently operates at 100% all the time based on a fixed plan and fully allocated non-flexible budget is unlikely to notice the need or opportunity to change. Therefore, building margins, or space is essential. This is especially true in budgeting in order to allow for pauses and changes in plans to ensure operational agility. This could be, for example, planning for alternative usage of resources later in the budget year if circumstances change. Perhaps the purchase of a boat could become a purchase of a car instead.

At an operational level, this may be as simple as ensuring that the drivers are confident that they have the right to decide which road to take to a project if they have reason to believe one is safer on a particular day, even if it takes more time. They need to then be confident that they have the authority, and the space, to make those decisions without fearing repercussions from applying their human judgment.

How to….

**Set up a context-monitoring plan**

**Why have a plan?** Creating a plan at the start of your project for context-monitoring will help staff involved to understand what context-monitoring is and how it will work. It also helps for institutional memory and consistency if staff transition away from the project and can be useful if wider peers or donors are interested as to how context-monitoring is done as well as accountability within your office. A clear and simple framework can empower local-decision-makers to better initiate and implement adaptive programming. It should be as simple as possible.

**What do you base it on?** The indicators and signals identified should mostly come from the local scenarios (often from GECARRs/GEOCARRs), developed in consultation with communities and partners involved in the project They can also be drawn from previous context analysis assessments. The scenarios, and the context-monitoring that follows, may have been initiated as a result of a specific project but can have benefits for an entire programme in terms of enabling adaptive management.

If the project and/or WV is new to the area, context questions could be included in baseline data collection or initial assessments to get a better understanding of the situation. Selecting your sources for information will be critical to get good information later. Different scenarios can be tracked using the same indicator or signal, but look at different thresholds for when it might stay the same, get better or worse.

Alternatively, there may be some signals/indicators that are monitored for smaller but still important changes that happen within the parameters of one scenario. The facilitators who guided you for the scenario planning may be able to help propose some indicators/signals you could look at. It is also important to consider what information is realistic to acquire.

It is important to carefully define indicators and signals if they are going to be collected across multiple locations or repeated over time in order to look for trends. There needs to be a common understanding of what each one means, while also maintaining a simplicity to adapt them quickly.

**Who should be involved in developing it?** All staff who will have a role in context-monitoring (connections, collection, analysis or decision making) should be given the opportunity to input into the plan. This can include MEAL, security and operations staff. Input from communities and partners should be sought. The National Office senior leadership team (SLT) as well as the regional office should also have the opportunity to input and review for buy-in, support and in order to align with wider context-monitoring initiatives, strategy and security plans.

**When do you develop it?** Begin thinking about what to put in the plan during your design/redesign workshop. If some staff are not present, they can and should input afterwards.

**How often should it be updated?** All elements should be held flexibly so that they can change as required. At a minimum, the plan (especially the indicators and signals) should be reviewed every 6 months, and more frequently as the context changes. This should be alongside scenario review (upon which indicators/signals are based).

**What is included in the plan?** The plan (usually done in an excel file) does not have to be very detailed. If you would like to see a working version, please ask your mentor or the FCPA core group. It should include information on the following:

***List of defined indicators and signals***

* *Number*: There is no set number of indicators or signals. The key is to select the most important ones that will give information about current and future changes and balance this with what is practical and reasonable within the context.
* *Range/type*: It can be useful to group indicators/signals by type/categories (e.g political, economic, security, education, health, protection, conflict, displacement, environment) as a way to organise and ensure holistic tracking of all elements of the situation. It can also be useful to organise according to signal or indicator. They should primarily be based on scenarios.
* You do not have to have indicators/signals across all of the above categories if they are not relevant. Choice of indicators may also be determined by how easy they are to regularly monitor/collect and how sensitive they might be to changes in context that will best enable real time adaptive decision making.
* *Levels*: Indicators/signals can monitor the context at different levels e.g national, sub national, city, district, neighbourhood or village levels with the aim of providing information that will be helpful to make decisions. Your choice of indicators/signals (and if you choose to have a mix) will therefore depend on the overarching purpose and parameters of the context monitoring. It is not compulsory to have a mix of indicators from every level and choice of indicators may also be determined by the information available/capacity to collect.
* *Sensitivities and staff safety*: Some indicators/signals may be sensitive in nature and more challenging to track, whether due to lack of data, people not being willing to share or at times people finding it difficult to think ahead to what the future might bring. World Vision’s context-monitoring should never put staff or stakeholders (including communities) at risk and should collect information on a voluntary basis and in a way where people are comfortable. Work with security staff to assess the risks during the entire context-monitoring process and put in place appropriate mitigation measures (e.g collecting data anonymously).
* *New or existing*: Indicators/signals do not necessarily have to be new. Some identified may already be tracked by other departments e.g MEAL via existing humanitarian accountability mechanisms or community consultations, security or operations, and can be incorporated into the plan. Indicators/signals can be sectoral ones that projects already use at the output level through the programme MEAL system (such as levels of clean water, malnutrition, children attending school, which affect specific activities) *as well as* wider economic, environmental, conflict political or social issues, which might impact outcomes. The key is to ensure this data is looking at either current or future changes.
* This strategic context-monitoring may often be similar to that which exists within the programme MEAL system, but it is not the same. MEAL-monitoring is an essential function that happens alongside and the two can complement each other. As they have different criteria of success, they should not be merged but they can and should inform each other. This strategic context-monitoring should also most of the time be owned by collaborative multi-departmental team to ensure diverse perspective and collective understanding
* *Final decision on indicators/signals*: It can be helpful to have a designated owner of the context-monitoring process who makes the final decision on indicators/signals once consultation has taken place. They should try and get good enough consensus but also keep the process moving so that it starts to bring practical value to project level decision making as soon as possible. Given the multidisciplinary nature of this, it could be staff from a range of departments, including operations, security or MEAL.
* *Thresholds*: Thresholds are markers that help identify when a scenario has or is occurring. As they are reached or exceeded, they can help prompt conversations about necessary changes in project activities or other supporting services. Project decision makers will look at this in light of context specific implications of any change (e.g ongoing operations, capacity to change and other factors and incentives). These thresholds could be ranges, statements as well as specific answers, depending on the level of information available. Using the car analogy, this is the airbag that is triggered when something is hit. Similarly, it is much better to act in advance based on anticipatory signals than wait until a threshold has been passed

***Who will collect it****?*

Good context-monitoring uses multiple perspectives to understand the context from different qualitative and quantitative perspectives. This is best done by using staff that represents diverse perspectives themselves to conduct it, and therefore ensuring multiple departments are part of the process. These departments can for example be operations, security and MEAL, but it should usually not be the responsibility of any one department alone.

An active SLT decision should be made on how to best allocate these roles, including the department that formally oversees it, keeping in mind staff capacity, capabilities and already ongoing monitoring activities by for example the MEAL, programme officers, peace-building and security teams.

Any member of the project staff can contribute information about the context. It is good to consider how well the collector will be received by the intended source. Language, gender, seniority, tribal affiliation, ethnicity, existing relationships and other factors may all impact what kind of information a person will likely be able to collect.

Where possible, it is good to assign people to specific indicators/signals so roles are clear. Multiple staff can bring back information on the same indicator or signal if appropriate and this can help for triangulation. As information can be collected by a combination of security, MEAL and/or operations staff it can also be gathered to serve multiple purposes.

It is key that staff who are collecting data understand that context-monitoring is different from project activity and output monitoring. If staff are not used to collecting this kind of information, training, practice and learning may be needed and resources can be found from the FCPA or regional teams and mentors.

***How data will be collected?***

This will be determined by the indicators/signals and the way they can be measured. Some will be more challenging to measure and may lend themselves more to data from a particular source. Data can be collected via community or staff conversations, key informant interviews, focus groups or surveys. If it is helpful to come up with pre-designed questions for indicators or signal, this can be put into your plan if of use, or kept separate.

Questions could be drawn from existing WV context analysis tools such as Making Sense of Turbulent Contexts (MSTC), Integrating Peacebuilding and Conflict Sensitivity (IPACS) or Good Enough Context Analysis for Rapid Response (GECARR)/and the online version GEOCARR, following the usual format of asking *what is happening now* and *what might happen next* and *what that would look like.* See “*Further considerations when doing context-monitoring*” for documentation and making sense of the information.

***Frequency of collecting information and any needed budget****:*

National offices can decide what frequency of collecting context information is useful to inform decision making.Indicators/signals may require different frequencies of collection depending on the rate of change in the context. Having a range of frequencies for collecting different bits of information may add complexity but clear assigning of responsibilities for who collects what information can help. If a frequency doesn’t work, the plan should be flexible enough to change it. The resulting schedule should also include any budget considerations for collecting information.

***Sources: Who will it be collected from?***

Data for context-monitoring can and should be collected from a wide range of sources for triangulation and validation. This includes primary data collection from residents or leaders, project staff observations and analysis, as well as secondary data from peer/partner agency meetings, humanitarian sector clusters and literature.

**What is not included in the plan?**

The plan only highlights of the steps and methods that the context-monitoring will include. It does not need to include the details, decisions made as a result, nor the actual content of context-monitoring.

**Further considerations when doing context-monitoring**

**Integration**: Context-monitoring can be done alongside or as part of other project activities, assessments or monitoring exercises, if it helps to efficiently utilise staff and stakeholders’ (including communities) time. If there are concerns about merging, they can remain separate.

**Expectations**: Whatever the method of data collection, care must be taken to set expectations with all involved (staff, stakeholders, communities). Providing information about the context may not necessarily result in further assistance from WV and this should be explained.

**Accountability** back to communities and stakeholders is key. If communities and stakeholders provide information about the context WV staff should explain how they intend to use it and aim to go back to communities and stakeholders and show what changes have been made if possible.

**Creativity**: Look for creative ways of collecting context information, for example whether feedback mechanisms could be adapted to also give context information or use of technology may be appropriate.

**Documentation**: Agree with project staff if context-monitoring information needs to be written down, as well as examples of how it informs decision making. If any data is written down, discuss if there are any considerations for storage and security.

**Make sense of the information:** The purpose of context-monitoring is to inform decision-making. Therefore, a key aspect is to collect information, make sense of it, and then present it to those who will make decisions based upon it. It is important that those who are involved in context-monitoring understand how their information will be used by decision-makers. Further guidance on decision-making can be requested from the FCPA core group.

**Information-sharing outside of the project**: If stakeholders outside the project team, either within the national office or from other offices or donors wish to see or use the context-monitoring data, there should be a conversation as to why before this happens. As a general rule the raw data from this context-monitoring should stay with the national office and their regional office, and only shared beyond that if approved by senior leadership for a specific and time-bound reason.

Even then it should usually be in a redacted format. If project staff feel that context data is being monitored outside the project team, then it could either produce a hesitancy to report or could mean they may seek additional but unnecessary further validation. This could affect the timeliness and practicalities of collection of information and impair agile decision making. The information could be requested by donors as context changes but this might be more ad hoc requests.